Partnerships To Support Global Health

ASM is involved with a variety of international partners supporting clinical labs and other global health activities

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Partnerships to achieve specified goals are characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility.

In the clinical laboratory, for which resources for meeting global health needs are particularly scarce, identifying and implementing efficient ways to leverage skills, expertise, and talents is of utmost importance. Partnerships offer one of the best and most cost-effective means for individuals and organizations to do more together than they can alone, even in the most resource-constrained settings. For instance, when addressing clinical lab needs, partners with expertise in different specialties can pool their know-how, coordinate their efforts, and thus more effectively strengthen clinical laboratory practices in resource-poor countries.

Since first becoming involved in clinical laboratory strengthening efforts internationally, ASM has relied on partnerships to maximize its impact. ASM and three other laboratory-focused organizations—the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI), the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), and the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP)—formed a coalition, working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through cooperative agreements.

The separate activities of each of these CDC Laboratory Coalition partners are designed to complement one another when they work together in developing countries. Where appropriate, the partners travel to the same project country and develop coordinated plans, with members from each organization focusing on their areas of specific strength. To avoid duplicative efforts, coalition members stay informed about ongoing work of each coalition partner through conference calls and meetings, while working collaboratively to standardize tools and harmonize training programs. Such close coordination is imperative when facing the challenges of scaling up services for properly diagnosing and treating patients with infectious diseases.

Ambitious Initiatives for TB Diagnostic Laboratories

On 22–24 January 2008, global health experts and policy makers from 33 countries met during a two-day conference in Maputo, Mozambique, that was organized by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa (WHO-AFRO) and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The organizers asked conference participants to develop a consensus plan for standardizing three high-priority infectious diseases, namely tuberculosis (TB), HIV/AIDS, and malaria.

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Summary

- Partnerships provide ASM an efficient means for leveraging the skills, expertise, and talents of its members when addressing global health needs.
- The Maputo Declaration provides guidelines for setting up sustainable lab-based testing to diagnose three high-priority infectious diseases, namely tuberculosis (TB), HIV/AIDS, and malaria.
- Disparate public health issues can and should be approached simultaneously, taking advantage of the expanded lab capacity to target many different infectious diseases.

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Moving TB Laboratory Capacity Strengthening Forward: a Global Laboratory Initiative

Developing a strategic plan and roadmap to guide the massive scale-up of laboratory services is an essential first step in effectively addressing the diagnostic challenges of TB-HIV and MDR-TB within the MDG framework. However, TB laboratory constraints center on cross-cutting issues such as infrastructure and human resource development, thereby requiring a multifaceted but integrated approach to laboratory capacity strengthening within the context of laboratory quality systems and cross-cutting disease control mechanisms. A Global Laboratory Initiative (GLI), aimed at universal access to quality-assured TB diagnostic services by 2015, was subsequently proposed to and endorsed by the STP Coordinating Board in October 2007. Components of this Initiative include:

- Global policy guidance on appropriate laboratory technology and best practices
- Laboratory advocacy and resource mobilization
- Laboratory capacity development and coordination
- Interface design with other laboratory networks to ensure appropriate integration
- Standardized laboratory quality assurance
- Coordination of technical assistance
- Effective knowledge sharing

The GLI will provide a focus for TB laboratory activities while actively seeking integrated laboratory solutions through coordination with other laboratory program and partners. The associated business model rests on a flexible and responsive approach involving comprehensive resource mapping and multisectoral partnerships.

Some Partnerships Aimed More Broadly To Meet Local Diagnostic Needs

After civil unrest over the past decade damaged much of the national health infrastructure in Côte d’Ivoire, ASM embarked on a partnership under STP-GLI with the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), a Switzerland-based nonprofit. Together with the CDC, WHO, the National TB Program, and the Côte d’Ivoire Ministry of Health, ASM and FIND are developing a coordinated technical assistance plan to help that country develop clinical laboratory components that are a part of its national strategic plan for combating TB.

“The feedback we are receiving from the field is very positive,” says John Nkengasong from the CDC Global AIDS Program (GAP). “Countries are happy with the technical assistance that ASM is providing, especially in the area of TB diagnosti-
diagnostics, enhancing lab capacity to diagnose TB, including sputum-smear microscopy, culture, and drug susceptibility testing.”

Building partnerships to strengthen laboratory capacity is crucial, agrees John Ridderhof from the CDC National Center for Preparedness, Detection and Control of Infectious Diseases, who serves as chair of the STP-GLI. “All the organizations and the country have a shared need to work together on realistic and systematic improvements that create a culture of success,” he says. “It benefits everyone when the organizations take the initiative to coordinate efforts. We all want to be measured on our own merit, but demonstrating teamwork is one of the best models that our organizations can provide to countries that will eventually have to sustain progress through their own systems.”

ASM continues to explore new partners with which to work in building diagnostic laboratory capacity in developing countries. One such partner is the Foundation Mérieux in Lyon, France, that is dedicated to supporting local scientific research, building health infrastructure and human capacity, and providing support to people affected by infectious diseases in resource-poor settings.

“Infrastructure building, training in microbiology, and possibly translational research are tasks that could be performed in synergy by both organizations,” says Christophe Longuet, who is medical director for the foundation. “Such an innovative collaboration would definitely benefit the host countries and their populations in an area—the laboratory—which has been, up to now, much neglected.”

Such collaborations between development partners who foster diagnostic laboratory capacity building need not be limited to only one or a few infectious diseases. Thus, although the entry point may be a specific disease such as TB, the endpoint is capacity building on a far broader public health scale. Both the Maputo Declaration and STP-GLI state that collaborative laboratory strengthening efforts need to expand to include entire health systems. Disparate public health issues can and should be approached simultaneously, taking advantage of the expanded lab capacity to target many different infectious diseases. Indeed, ASM is well-suited to addressing such issues because its members cover the full range of microbiological diseases, and many of them are accustomed to following integrated approaches when conducting laboratory diagnoses.

“The important thing is to work toward integration of different diseases from the lab point of view and also to take any opportunity we have on specific disease activity as a good excuse to strengthen overall lab systems,” says FIND chief executive officer Giorgio Roscigno. “Quality assurance, quality control, standard operating procedures, good laboratory practices—all these things ASM has quite exquisite capacity to achieve.”

Patients waiting at a busy TB clinic in Côte d’Ivoire.